

DOUBTING CASTLE



RIARS and vines, even trees of good girth, have so grown over and around Hammerton House that it has become part of the wilderness again, and one standing six feet away from the high wall would not suspect a hidden cicatrice of crumbled roof, fallen doors, choked cellars.

It lies at the edge of the primeval forest which wraps Mount Powasket in a blue-green cloak, and whose underbrush is kept out of New Greece with difficulty. Some day the hem of the old mountain's garment may again sweep over New Greece as it has over Hammerton House, or it may be that New Greece will spread its blight into the forest until that mountain is as naked and unlovely as many of its brethren—the shorn hills, like Samson, without strength.

Hammerton House is the scar of an ancient sin. There once lived in it a strange company of three: an Englishman, a Hindoo Princess, and a servant, known to New Greece as "Ali Baba." One day the Englishman and Ali Baba went away together, taking with them a swarthy child, but leaving the Princess behind. It was told that there was a statue of an armless woman—some heathen goddess—at the place where a Christian headstone should have been.

After that the smoke rose no more from the red chimneys of Hammerton House, and the swallows built there instead; the roses grew wild, clambering with their forbidding thorns all around the gates, so weaving them together and upholding the rusting iron that the place was better guarded than ever, particularly as it was well known in the village that the Princess still walked and cried in the deserted garden. You could hear her on any midnight, in June, among the unruly roses—in the snows of Adirondack winters, or among the fallen leaves of autumn.

But daytimes, the brave little boys of New Greece tested their strength of mind by throwing stones at the glass of the dormer windows, which were just visible

from a rise of ground across the road, or from the branches of a pine tree, and at last there were only splinters, like jagged shining teeth, left in the windows.

The wilderness had possessed Hammerton House for twenty years when little Phil Blanchard climbed the matted green walls. He had been reading about a Princess who slept for a century protected by a charmed hedge through which only the right man could pass. He did not find the Princess, although within a great tangle of thorns was a beautiful woman of marble, who had no arms.

Phil was eight years old, and felt that he needed just such a house as this. One could easily be a pirate or a robber at will in this secluded place. It was also particularly suitable to scenes from *Pilgrim's Progress*; a most excellent castle for Giant Despair, a Giant Despair who could change in the twinkling of an eye to Great Heart and cut off his own head, or to Apollyon, and be conquered by himself in the character of Christian.

After due deliberation he named the place "Doubting Castle," and took up his abode there formally. At first he was a little shy of the gloomy structure with its many mouths full of glass teeth, but once accustomed to it, there was nothing terrible about rotting furniture, rugs which had become dust, bits of moss and fern where pools of water had disintegrated floors and window-casings, and over a marble mantel-piece a hardly decipherable portrait of a proud-looking man in a red coat. At a corner of the frame a bat hung up-side-down, and grinned over its shoulder with angry white teeth.

By degrees, as Phil took possession of his kingdom, he became acquainted further with his subjects. There was the garter snake who lived in the fireplace under the portrait of the Englishman; in the kitchen cupboard, the door of which had fallen away, was a family of owls, each one exactly like all the rest, sitting in a row on the shelf and turning their heads this way and that in unison when he looked at them.

Upstairs was a pirate ship—an old-

fashioned four-posted bed, not so fallen to dust and decay but that one might poke it into shape and go to sleep on it when tired of other things. The windows of this room had not been broken, for the shutters had been left closed upon them and a grapevine had fastened them in place. It was dark, mysterious and close, with an odour of sandalwood.

Phil had heard about the Englishman, the Princess and Ali Baba, and how their ghosts came back and walked in the jungle garden; but he took care never to do anything that would displease them, and came to feel that they liked to have him there, sometimes joining in his games, silently. He found that instead of being terrible, as grown people had said, they were lonely creatures, needing comfort and companionship; and he knew how they looked, though they were evident to him only by sighing and rustling—shadows that glided away when he turned his head; but if he could have seen, the Princess no doubt would have been like pictures of Scherezade, or Lalla Rookh, who wore veils up to their large eyes. Ali Baba must be dark and fierce, with a turban, a curved sword at his side. As for the Englishman, whose picture was still above the mantel-piece, Phil liked him the least of the three.

If the moon is full and bright on a warm June evening there is really not much sense in going to bed at eight o'clock and staying there. Especially as that is the time, according to tradition, when the Englishman, the Princess and Ali Baba become visible. One might see, if one ventured at such a time, whether the Princess really looked like Scherezade and Lalla Rookh, how it was that Ali Baba constructed his curious turban, and if the Englishman might not be in reality a better fellow than the portrait indicated.

Phil rose and stood by his window, small and ghost-like in his clinging night-gown. The full moon stood just above Mount Powasket, which rose like a cloud-bank behind his Doubting Castle. Bats and lady birds were busy on swift errands through the blue air, and a night hawk high up repeated some magic word incessantly. An apple tree stretched sym-

pathetic arms quite to Phil's window and whispered, "Jump! I'll catch you!" He hung to the window-sill with his strong little fingers, feeling for the friendly bark with his bare toes, and before he fairly knew it, was in the cold dewy grass, welcomed shrilly by crickets. He ran down the garden path and entered his runway through the brush, constructed by many days' patient toil, and leading directly to the great brick wall, where a wild grapevine was always in waiting to give one a hand over.

The moonlight lay in great squares over the dining room floor, on the dusty table and the two chairs; there were only two, for the Englishman and his Princess had never received guests.

The Princess was sitting in her chair, the moonlight shining through her. She seemed sad and paid no attention to Phil. The Englishman, dim and haughty like his portrait, stood with his back to the empty fireplace, where the little garter snake lived. Phil crept around behind him and sat down in the fireplace, which was wide and deep, with stars showing at the top of the chimney.

But the ghosts seemed out of humour that evening, and played their own games, disputing among themselves about things that Phil did not understand.

"You did well, my lord," said the Princess, "to place that armless goddess at the head of my grave. Behold the symbol! She is the goddess of love, and she cannot in any way assist her worshippers, being armless. She could not keep me from growing old and frost-blackened in this wintry place—with the naked rose bushes and the snow. Your love, which was to be deathless—"

"It doesn't mend matters to reproach me," said the Englishman, wearily. "I loved while I could. Death is the order of the world, and the passing of a woman's beauty is merely one form of death. Why couldn't you take it as a soldier takes a gunshot wound—as a matter of course? We lived while we lived—and you were very beautiful—for a year or two."

"Love is not worth while," wailed the Princess. "I learned that—and yet love is the core of the world. There are no gods!"

Ali Baba had been standing at one side, stiff and silent, a model servant. But when the Princess declared there were no gods he pointed toward the window and the patch of starry sky that showed through it, meaning, perhaps, that stars are in some sense deities, or indicate, at least, much room outside the world and chance for many things to happen.

But the Princess said: "They are too far away. They have nothing to do with us, who are small and many like a swarming ant-hill. And the world is all a mistake, for love is not worth while."

"Well, well, my dear," said the Englishman, "neither are any of the other things worth while that men make such a fuss about—power, honour, glory, and all that. Why should love be an exception? Ali Baba, what is your philosophy?"

"My hands were busy and my soul found no time for thought. Yet, I do not know that I found any pleasure in my service that repaid me for the pain of my own life and of the lives I watched."

"Observe!" said the Englishman, making a gesture as if towards something listening outside in the forest, "we have weighed the world in the balance, we three, and we find it wanting."

A sound struck through the ghosts like a breeze through smoke, disintegrating them, and a moving light accompanied footsteps and voices about the house. There was a thumping reverberation as of boxes being brought in; a horse stamped somewhere in the bushes.

When it was still again a woman came into the dining room, carrying a candle which lit her face redly from below, as you will see in Doré's pictures of Hell. She looked for a long time at the portrait above the mantel-piece, unaware of little Phil peering out of the cavernous fireplace in front of her.

Phil thought her very beautiful and unhappy. It came to him with a pang of regret that she probably had a better claim to Doubting Castle than he could show, and that she might want it all to herself. Yet the house had been his for so long that he felt himself in a manner to be her host. There were holes in the floors that she should be warned against, and it would be well to establish the

reputation of the owls, the bats, and the garter snake, who were really excellent people but easily misunderstood.

She turned away from the picture at last, and went up the stairs that led to the room where was the great four-posted bed that Phil went voyaging in. He remembered with dismay that he had left the tattered coverlid displayed as a sail, and that his collection of broken china was set out upon the dresser in a way that might not please the rightful occupant of the room.

He came out of the fireplace and stood for a while musing with downcast head, working his bare toes in the matted dust of the rug. The light from the candle above lay in a yellow bar upon the hall floor, contrasting oddly with the white squares of moonlight. He could hear her moving about, the rustle of her skirts as she paced back and forth, and the soft sound of her voice, a low moaning under the breath.

Suddenly she stopped, with an exclamation of fright. Phil had crept half way upstairs, and could see her through the open door, examining with the candle the print of his own bare feet in the dust. He thought of his picture book that showed Crusoe bending over Friday's track in the sand, and laughed aloud. She sprang erect with her hand against her heart.

"I'm sorry I scared you," said Phil, his slim, white figure appearing in the doorway. "I only came up to tell you I'd been here, and about the owls and things. I didn't know you were coming."

She still held her hand over her heart, but the colour came back to her cheeks a little. She said quaveringly, "I expected to find ghosts here, but not children."

"There are ghosts," he replied; "but they're all the same as fairies and don't hurt anybody. I'm not afraid. I guess most boys wouldn't dast to come here at night, but I don't mind. My father was a soldier."

"So was mine, but it doesn't make one brave enough to hear—some things."

She looked at him doubtfully, as though, in his angelic attire, he might really have some wisdom from a higher

world to share with her—so harassed and miserable.

"The world," she said, "is a terrible place. You suffer there for the follies of people dead and gone. You are fawned upon for your money, and hunted for your face. I am tired of people. I'm going to live here all alone. I thought living here away from everybody would not be so bad as—being in the world."

Phil thought this a good idea. He explained to her how it was not such a bad place—gave the bats, owls, and garter snakes a good character. He also related with much picturesque detail the story of Giant Despair and Doubting Castle, and pointed out the advantages of the house for playing this game.

She listened with wide, sad eyes which held somewhere in their depths the promise that they might smile when she was less tired and wretched.

"And so *you*," she said, thoughtfully, "are Giant Despair!"

Giant Despair hid a yawn behind a grimy hand and showed an inclination, which she encouraged, to climb into her lap, where he promptly fell asleep.

Looking down upon him in wonder, she presently felt drowsy herself, and carried him to the wrecked four-masted

pirate vessel, took down the sail, and covered him over.

She pondered sleepily for a few moments, then lay down with her cheek against that of Giant Despair, and so they slept, quietly and comfortably.

The Princess wept in the moonlight: "My punishment is too heavy. She suffers; she is so young and knows already that nothing is worth while!"

"Don't reproach me," sighed the Englishman. "Everybody has to find it out sooner or later."

But Ali Baba said, diffidently: "If there is something better than love and power—when Buddha sat solitary under the Bo-Tree, after a while, Peace came."

So it happened that as the daughter of the Princess and the Englishman slept with her cheek against the small warm one of Giant Despair, a new consideration was creeping into the argument of the ghosts in Doubting Castle. If Ali Baba was right, they might, in time, decide that ghosts, ruins, and old sins need not be so very tragic—that even Giant Despair may be at core a child in masquerade, and Doubting Castle, if one looked at it reasonably, as cheerful a place as any other.

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